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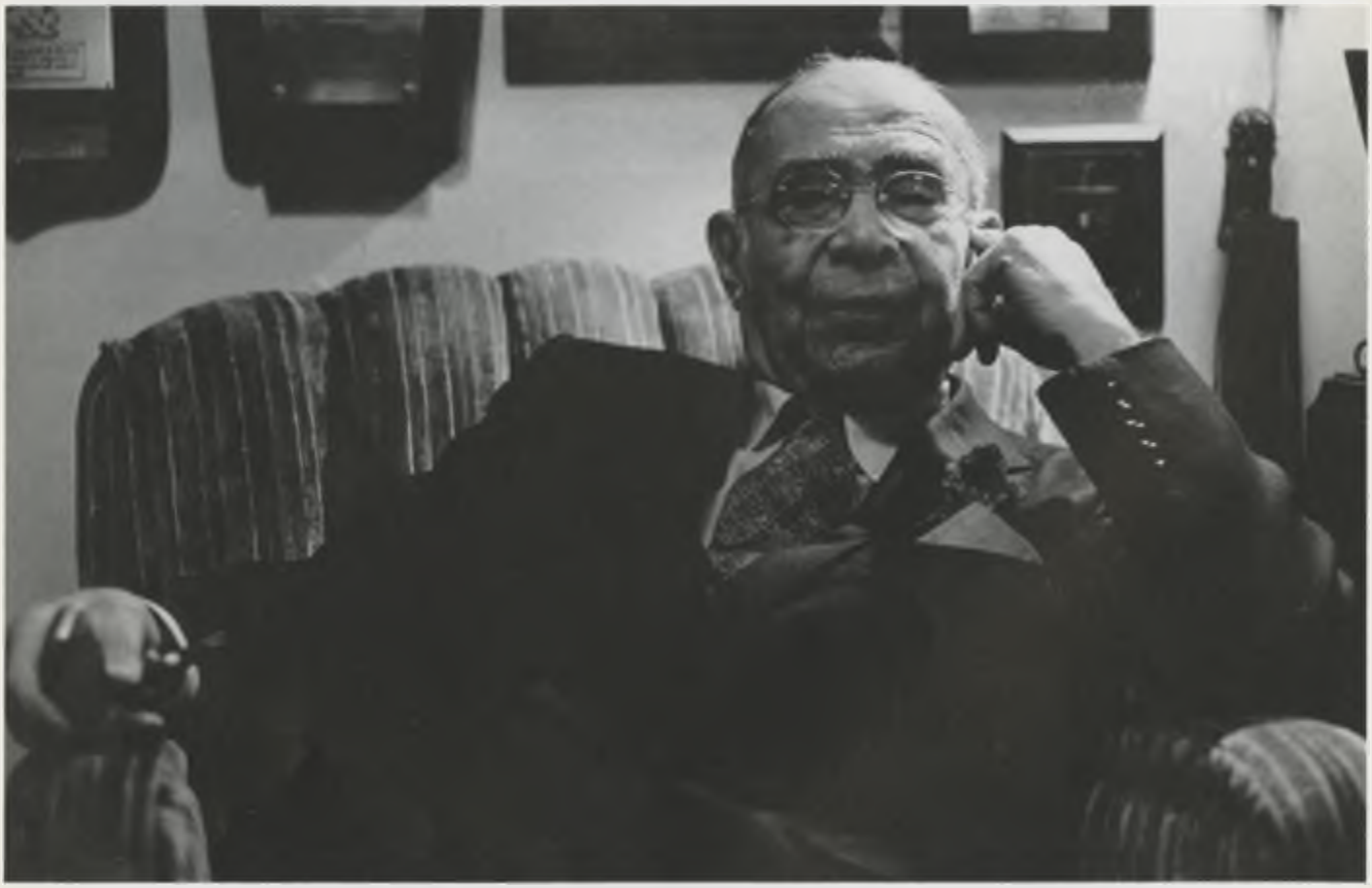


W. MONTAGUE COBB

His Long, Storied, Battle-Scarred Life

By Harriet Jackson Scarupa

The old fighter looks fragile now, his walk reduced to a tentative, slow motion shuffle, his voice sometimes winding down in fatigue or interrupted by coughs, his eyes squinting as he tries to read print that seems to him so very small. But his mind is still keen, overflowing with its treasure chest of memories, quotations, opinions, facts. And his will is still strong. Oh so strong.

Nobody—but nobody—has ever accused W. Montague Cobb of being passive.

"I'm a seasoned fighter and the battle never bothered me," says the 83-year-old teacher, anatomist, physical anthropologist, editor, writer, historian, medical, civic and civil rights leader. As for all those roles and then some:

As a full-time faculty member at the Howard University College of Medicine for 41 years (1932-73) and a visiting professor at 12 other medical schools, he has taught anatomy to some 6,000 medical students (by his count).

As an anatomist and physical anthropologist, his research has covered topics as diverse as the development of teeth in the walrus, aging changes in the human skeleton, the cranio-facial union in man, the role of anatomical records in city history and the physical anthropology of the Black American.

As an editor of the *Journal of the National Medical Association (JNMA)* for 28 years (1949-77), he is credited with transforming what was once a modest house organ into a lively, informative and influential medical journal.

On the pages of the *JNMA* and elsewhere, his documentation of the achievements, activities and concerns of the nation's Black physicians has earned him a reputation as the foremost living authority on Black medical history.

As a writer, he has been almost embarrassingly prolific. His 52-page list of publications runs to 1,113 titles, encompassing a book on the nation's first Black medical society, scientific monographs and abstracts, book reviews, tributes, editorials, book chapters and articles on just about every subject under the sun for scholarly, professional and popular magazines.

His leadership skills have found expression through a wide variety of outlets, including those as president of the American Association of Physical Anthropologists, the Anthropological Society of Washington, the National Medical Association, the Medico-Chirurgical Society of the District of Columbia, the Washington Society for the History of Medicine, the Venice Beach (Maryland) Citizens Association—and the NAACP.

Alongside the many serious roles he has played are those in a more carefree vein: the violinist who "treated" his students to the strains of a Handel sonata as they dissected cadavers in the anatomy laboratory; the self-acknowledged "ham" who entertained freshmen medical students with dramatized recitals of "Casey at the Bat" or "The Cremation of Sam McGee" and his friends with a legendary imitation of the late Howard University President Mordecai Wyatt Johnson; the bon vivant and raconteur who, with Arthur P. Davis, Sterling Brown and other members of the much storied Gourmet Club, turned fellowship, good eating, good drinking and questionable singing into a high art; the "captain" who strutted around his summer home in Venice Beach sporting the requisite cap, in keeping with his stature as owner of that mighty seagoing vessel, the Tuscarora, i.e. a rowboat; the author of a variety of light pieces in the *JNMA*, among them, a mock-treatise on an affliction suffered by many a middle-aged man of his acquaintance: "stomachus convivous or banquet belly."

Whatever role W. Montague Cobb has played at any given moment or any given decade, he has played it with verve. Whatever role W. Montague Cobb has played at any given moment or any given decade, he has seldom strayed from battle. Observes surgeon LaSalle D. Leffall Jr., his friend and former student: "He has been willing to enter the fray. That's one thing I can say about Dr. Cobb: *he has been willing to enter the fray.*"

Not surprisingly, then, controversy has touched Cobb's life more than once.

The Battles

Some 50 years before Jimmy "The Greek" Snyder caused an outcry by attributing the prowess of Black athletes to "big thighs that run up their backs," among other alleged "reasons," Cobb was demolishing the myth that Blacks are more anatomically equipped to excel in athletics than whites. The corollary of this myth—sometimes stated, sometimes not—was that Blacks were less anatomically equipped for strictly cerebral endeavors.

In a January 1936 article, "Race and Runners," published in *The Journal of Health and Physical Education*, he took aim at the then popularly held view that the success of Black sprinters and broad jumpers was due to such supposedly racially determined characteristics as "a longer heel bone," "a long Achilles tendon" and a "short-bellied calf." His weapon: simple scientific investigation. He compared X-rays of 1936 Olympic champion Jesse Owens' heel with that of a randomly selected white man of the same age and found, lo and behold, that Owens' heel bone was shorter, supposedly a "white" characteristic.

Cobb also compared Owens' legs to that of Frank Wykoff, the white co-holder of the world's record for the 100-yard dash at that time, and discovered, lo and behold, that the white runner had the allegedly "Black" calves and vice versa. He concluded: "The physiques of champion Negro and white sprinters in general and Jesse Owens in particular reveal nothing to indicate Negroid physical characters are anatom-

ically concerned with the present dominance of Negro athletes in national competition in the short dashes and the broad jump." Settling the whole silly matter once and for all (he thought), he wrote in a May 1947 article in *Negro Digest:* "Science has not revealed a single trait peculiar to the Negro alone, to which his athletic achievements could be attributed."

Around the same time, Cobb was addressing such other pseudoscientific bits of racism as the notions that Blacks were constitutionally more sexually promiscuous than whites (the term of the day was "oversexed") and that they were lower on the evolutionary chart, i.e. closer to apes, than whites.

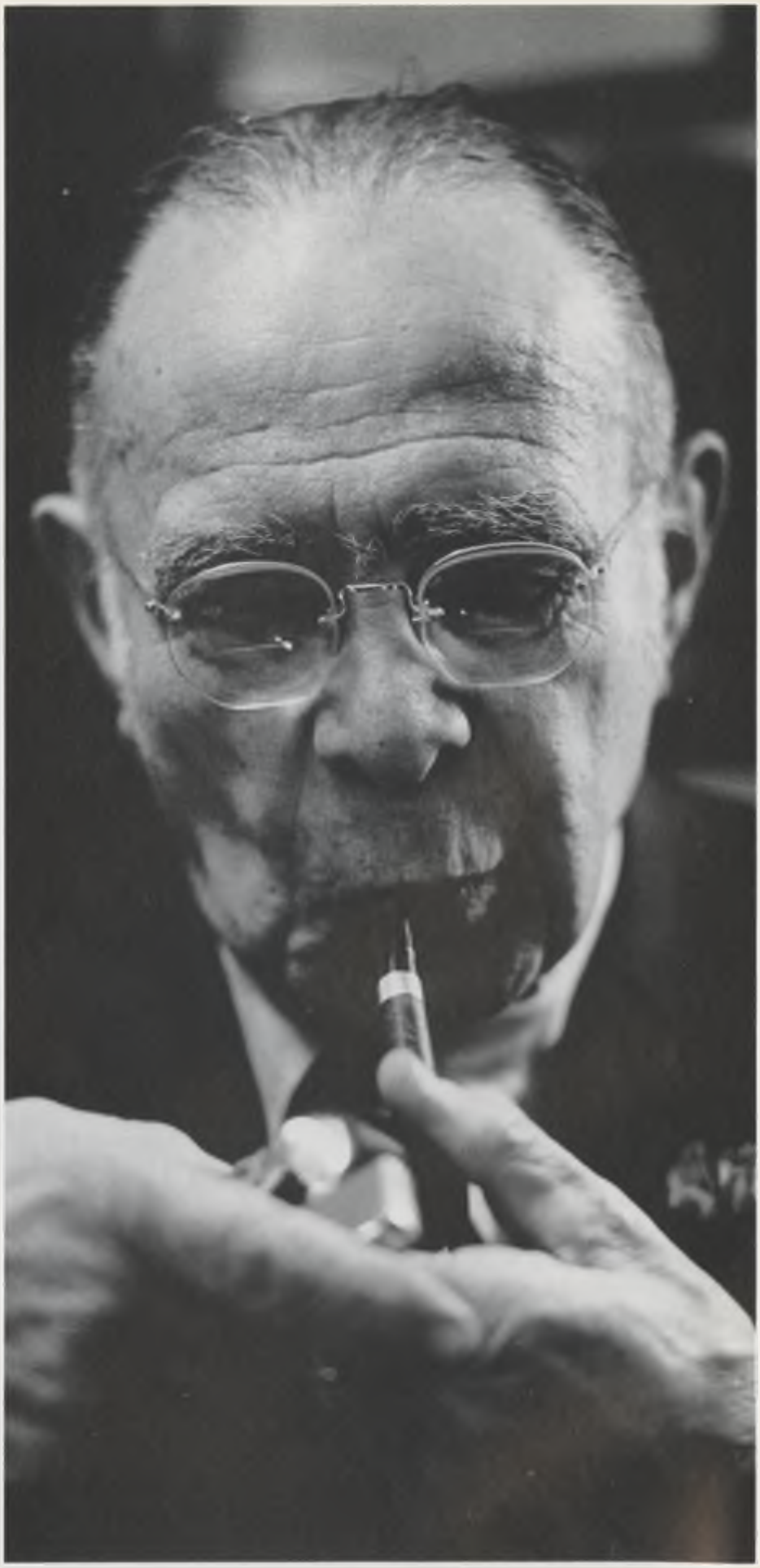
The first issue he laid to rest in a May 1947 article in *Our World* entitled "Are Negroes Oversexed?" "No known scientific fact can support the lie that Negroes as a race are oversexed," he wrote. "Absurd claims like these were seriously used by self-styled scientists as propaganda to keep the Negro enslaved and to maintain him in a degraded status after liberation."

The second issue he tackled in an article "Education in Human Biology: An Essential for the Present and Future" in the April 1943 issue of *The Journal of Negro History.* His method was simple. He drew a new hierarchical chart to illustrate human ascent. By turning the tree-like branches traditionally used to depict evolution sideways, he was able to show the races of mankind at levels of equality — as, in fact, they are — instead of the white man in the higher or superior position as had been the style of such charts in the past. (See "What Is Man? An Anatomist's View," *New Directions,* April 1976.)

He advocated that his chart or one like it be introduced to schoolchildren as part of a required instructional program in physical anthropology. Through such a program, they could be exposed to "the full and honest exposition of the nature and import of racial differences," he wrote. Thus they would come to see that "Race as a biological is no index of physical, mental or cultural capacity." It was a theme that also permeated his own teaching at Howard.

Attacking segregation and discrimination in medical education, professional training and hospital customs constituted another grand Cobb crusade. Some particulars:

In 1947 in the *Bulletin of The Medico-Chirurgical Society of the District of Columbia* (of which he was founding editor),



he lambasted the practice of turning outmoded hospitals to Blacks in an allegorically titled article, "Old Clothes to Sam: The Negro's Hospital Dilemma." Indeed, the phrase "old clothes to Sam" made its way into the general lexicon as a shorthand to describe Black Americans' second-class treatment.

As president of the Medico-Chirurgical Society in the '40s and '50s, he led the fight for the admission of Black physicians to the city's predominantly white hospitals and headed the organization's negotiating team which in 1952 successfully forced the Medical Society of the District of Columbia to admit Blacks.

Looking beyond his native city, in 1957 he conceived and organized a national conference on hospital integration under the sponsorship of the National Medical Association, the NAACP and the National Urban League. Through the First Imhotep National Conference on Hospital Integration and its six successors, hospital administrators across the nation were pressured to open their doors to Black residents, interns, patients and physicians. At the same time, the pressure he and others put on the nation's medical schools helped open those doors as well.

Related to all this was Cobb's crusade to begin to redress the deplorable health conditions so endemic in so much of Black America. "Even though health conditions in this country as a whole are far from satisfactory, the plight of the Negro is worse than that of the white," he told members of a Senate committee as part of his testimony on behalf of the NAACP in support of a 1946 bill to establish national health insurance. He did so in defiance of the stance taken by the powerful American Medical Association, which equated the intent of the bill with that old bugaboo, "socialized medicine." As a result, according to Cobb, "Some people came to Mordecai [Wyatt Johnson] and said, 'Why don't you throw that fellow off the faculty?' . . . But Mordecai never bothered me."

Cobb and his NAACP brethren saw the controversial bill as "a means whereby the economic barrier to the extension of medical care to the millions of American citizens who so sorely need, but cannot afford, such care, may be overcome," as he testified. The bill didn't pass, but Cobb remained loyal to the principles enshrined in it. As he wrote in an article in *The Crisis* a year later, "Health care . . . has to be readily available to *all* in a successful democracy, without regard to status or pocketbook."

In another arena of his life, he was waging still another battle against the status quo.

In the '50s, Cobb boycotted meetings of the American Association for the Advancement of Science and the American Association of Anatomists to protest the organizations' decisions to hold their annual meetings in cities where segregation was practiced in hotels, restaurants and public transportation. These well-publicized boycotts ["Dr. Cobb Sets an Example," ran a headline above an article in the January 14, 1956 *Afro-American*] helped the organizations' members face the contradiction between being scientists in pursuit of truth and tacitly supporting racially exclusionary practices for which there could be no scientific justification whatsoever. The result: both organizations formally resolved to refuse to hold any future meetings in cities where segregation was the norm.

Later, in 1965, he put far more than his intellect and influence on the line when he journeyed to Selma as president of the National Medical Association to give moral and other support to Black Alabama physicians who had volunteered to treat besieged participants of the historic Selma to Montgomery march.

The '80s, a quieter time for many, have not necessarily been a quieter time for Cobb. In 1982, the Metropolitan Washington YMCA announced its intent to close its 12th Street (Anthony Bowen) branch which was located in the neighborhood of Cobb's birth, an area now sullied with drug trafficking and desperately in need of constructive recreational outlets for youth. The Y made the announcement at a time it was promoting a posh new downtown facility whose high entrance fees put it out of reach of most D.C. residents.

Cobb was among those outraged. In a letter to the City Council, he charged that the action was "arrogant and presumptuous in the extreme, and may mildly be termed bigoted and irresponsible," a charge highlighted in a front page Metro section article in *The Washington Post* on March 7. A picture of an angry Cobb ran with the article.

Cobb found the action not only galling in light of the neighborhood's needs, but also because it seemed to desecrate history. The Anthony Bowen branch was the first Black YMCA in the nation, one that had enriched the lives of many a Black boy like himself when so many doors in the nation's capital had been closed to them because of race. In light of the protests, the YMCA backed down, agreeing to retain the Anthony Bowen branch in the neighborhood but to house it in a building that was in better structural condition than the original.

As he moves through the eighth decade of his life, Cobb has tended to dwell less on the concerns of any one particular constituency, whether Black physicians or poor D.C. youth, but on an issue of crucial import to *all:* survival. In his writing and speeches, he has again and again phrased the issue as a conflict between *"Homo sanguinis,* or Man the Bloody" and *"Homo sapiens,* or Man the Wise." Speaking, for instance, at a meeting of the American Anthropological Association last November, he elaborated:

"Man has been a bloody predatory primate always given to the overkill for over a million years, but only during the last 3,000 years or so, has he developed anything like ethical systems.

"At the present time it would seem that *Homo sanguinis* has the upper hand. Can *Homo sapiens* win? . . .

"Let us hope that *Homo sapiens* will prevail . . . and that we may use reason more in the solution of our problems. Otherwise we may eliminate our species, along with many others, and ruin our planet in the process."

And so the old gadfly/crusader/fighter carries on. He even, briefly, adopts a pugilistic stance as he confronts a writer who has come to his house near Howard's main campus to try to find out why one man has been so drawn to battle, what compelled him to take on so many diverse roles and what thread ties them all together.

As he sits in his formal Victorian-styled living room in his impeccably tailored grey suit, puffing on his ever-present pipe filled with his favorite Captain Black tobacco, he looks very much the dignified elder statesman he is. Then he pounces. In no uncertain terms he lets the writer know that if she want to know what his life is all about, she's going to have to go about it *his* way. "You come to me with a list of things you want to know and you want to ask them the way you want to ask them," he scolds. "But, after all, you have to take the subject into consideration. He or she has some points of view too."

His point of view right now, he scolds anew, is that in order to understand the things he's done and the thoughts he has "you have to know what lies behind them." You have to look at a life—his life—from the beginning and see how one thing has led to another. And if in the process it means pausing for a good story or two or three or four or a burst of song, a bit of pantomime, a

recitation of verse or a tour of the house, well, then, so be it.

The Cobb House

If ever a dwelling reflects the character of the occupant, this sturdy three-story brick rowhouse (circa 1890) does. Indeed, it is a veritable museum to the life and times of W. Montague Cobb.

Almost every available inch of wall space is covered with: his own watercolors; paintings done by his mother and friends; family photographs (of his earliest known ancestors, his grandmother, parents, wife, two daughters, four grandchildren); photographs of teachers, friends, students and public figures he has known; an old print of Vesalius (the father of anatomy) dissecting in secret; a reproduction of Rembrandt's "The Lesson in Anatomy;" his 1930 license to practice medicine and surgery in the District of Columbia; a large drawing showing Amherst College during his student days there in the '20s; honorary degrees from 10 institutions; honorary plaques from some two dozen organizations; photographs galore of Cobb, of course—sitting in a deck chair on the Battleship USS Missouri when he was an honored guest of the Secretary of the Navy; surrounded by skeletons in his Howard anatomy lab; playing the violin with a string quartet; witnessing President Lyndon B. Johnson signing the Medicare Bill in 1965; being presented with a "Living Legacy" award by President Jimmy Carter 14 years later. . . .

Then too: small family photographs crowd tables throughout the house; bookshelves hold weathered volumes on a wide array of subjects, carefully labeled photo albums, notebooks filled with scientific notations; a bed serves as an improvised file cabinet supporting piles of reprints of articles, correspondence, magazines. . . .

"I live in a kind of organized chaos," Cobb admits. "And somehow due to my archeological system of knowing in what layer a thing is, I make out."

Childhood Years

The house where Cobb has lived for more than half a century is eight blocks away from his boyhood home. In that modest rowhouse near 13th and T Streets, N.W., the only child of William Elmer and Alexzine Montague Cobb was delivered on October 12, 1904 by a Howard trained physician, Dr. Austin Maurice Curtis. "So Howard has touched my life from the beginning," Cobb says.

His father was a printer, who had come to

Washington from Selma, Ala., in 1889 to work in the U.S. Government Printing Office and later opened his own small printing shop not far from the family home. "My father never had any money, but he was never afraid of anybody," Cobb reflects.

Through his father, he says, he learned the importance of standing up for one's principles. Through both parents, he learned "not to hate." Imhotep, the name he was later to choose for those '50s conferences on hospital integration, reflects that teaching. The name of the Egyptian demigod of medicine, Imhotep means "He who cometh in peace," Cobb explains.

The Washington of his childhood was, of course, rigidly segregated. As he ironically observes, "The first time somebody tried to explain apartheid to me, I said, 'You don't need to' because all of my early life had been lived under apartheid in the capital city of the great nation declaimed as the 'Land of the Free and the Home of the Brave.'"

He attended Patterson Elementary School and then went on to Dunbar High School, the alma mater of generations of high achievers. He started kindergarten at four and it was there, he says, that he got his first interest in "what education is." "The teachers, Miss Montgomery and Miss Williams [yes, he remembers their names] made the classroom so happy," he recalls. "So I learned then unconsciously that good teaching involves making the pupils enjoy learning."

At Dunbar, Cobb received what he considers the finest of educations. "I used to later tell my good white friends, 'It's a pity that all the white kids in town could not be exposed to somebody like Clyde McDuffie' [a Dunbar Latin teacher]. He would come in and put the daily paper on the board showing the movement of the Germans and the Allies [during World War I] and talk about it and then he'd say, 'Now, let's see how Caesar Augustus fought it out on those same lines.' And you'd learn."

From Dunbar, he headed for Amherst College, his interest in attending the Massachusetts liberal arts college having been sparked by the visits of some Amherst students to Dunbar. In his Amherst class, ('25), he was part of a quartet of young Black men who were to make distinctive marks on history. The other members: Mercer Cook, the diplomat and scholar; William Hastie, the first Black federal judge; and Ben Davis, the U.S. Communist Party leader who was once a popular city councilman from Harlem. Charles Drew, Cobb's boyhood friend, who later carved out his own niche of fame as surgeon and blood plasma storage developer, was in the class behind him.

Except for his interaction with Amherst's few Black students, his college years were spent in an essentially all-white world. That provided some lessons in itself. As he puts it, "As I got a chance to observe the white man, I recognized he didn't have an exceptional amount of brains. Some Black boys were brighter than I was—not too many, but some. [No one ever has accused Cobb of inordinate modesty.] And I saw a lot of dumb white boys. So I thought, 'What is all this race stuff about?'"

At Amherst, Cobb proved to be a top student—and a star athlete. He excelled at track and boxing, so for a while he was literally—not just symbolically—a fighter. By his senior year, he had racked up the best record in his class in zoology, which earned him a scholarship the following summer to study and conduct research at the prestigious Marine Biological Laboratory in Woods Hole, Mass. Traditionally, winners of the scholarship went on to academic careers in biology. But Cobb was already committed to a career in medicine, having been accepted to the Howard University College of Medicine.

Cobb the Student

Why medicine? "I knew Dr. Curtis had delivered me in the home and over the years I got to know other doctors who would treat people in the neighborhood. I just felt a doctor was respected and made sick people well." Teasing now, he adds, "And at the time all hospitals used iodophor (a disinfectant) and it smelled good. [He takes an exaggerated sniff.] I thought, 'That's what I'd like to be: a doctor.'"

Returning to the subject of that summer at Woods Hole, Cobb takes out his perfectly preserved notebook filled with the notations and drawings he made for the course he took there in embryology. Before long he embarks on what the visiting writer considers a long diversionary discourse on such topics as how to catch specimens for laboratory studies and the mating habits of seaworms. The latter subject even inspires a quotation from "Romeo and Juliet" which he delivers in full theatrical style: "Violent delights have violent ends and in their triumph die." [No wonder his good friend Arthur P. Davis calls him an "aborted great actor" as well as "a first class ham, no make that 'a 24-carat ham.'"]

When the writer tries to get the conversation back to what she considers the right track, he refuses. "*No,*" he practically shouts, and proceeds to share new details of what he learned in that embryology course more than 60 years ago.

Finally, he says, "On the basis of the training I had in the course, when I was a senior in medical school, I was asked to be an instructor in embryology. You get it? And on the basis of *that* Numa P.G. Adams, who was the first Black dean of the medical school, asked me if I was interested in pursuing a full-time academic career. So the Woods Hole experience is what led to my whole teaching career."

Continuing the narrative, Cobb says, "I told Adams, 'Yes, I would be interested in an academic career . . . if I could pick my field.' He said, 'What field do you want?' I said, 'Anatomy.'" Why Anatomy?, he is later asked. "Anatomy is the kindergarten [i.e., the foundation] of medicine," he recites as if he's said it many times before, as he has.

Once Adams gave his assent to Cobb's choice, Cobb says, "We had to hunt around for a suitable place for me to go for further study." That suitable place turned out to be Western Reserve University [now Case Western] in Cleveland where he enrolled in the graduate program in physical anthropology and anatomy—two fields that have a natural affinity.

But before he embarked on those studies, he had a few things to get out of the way—earning his M.D. from Howard, completing an internship at Freedmen's Hospital, (now Howard University Hospital), obtaining his license to practice medicine and surgery in the District of Columbia and marrying a young schoolteacher named Hilda B. Smith. It was a marriage that was to last for 47 years before her death from cancer in 1976 and today Cobb's conversation is sprinkled with abundant references to "the voice of authority," as he teasingly used to call his wife.

Cobb the Investigator

He obtained his Ph.D. in anatomy and physical anthropology from Western Reserve in 1932 and then embarked directly on a full-time teaching career at Howard. It was at Western Reserve, which boasted an excellent anatomy laboratory and museum, that he first investigated the physical differences between Blacks and whites. He took a comprehensive series of measurements on Black and white cadavers in order to come up with some hard data on the

subject and reviewed the data of other researchers in the field as well.

Among the conclusions he drew from this investigation, as he reported in a 1934 article in *The Journal of Negro Education*, "The Physical Constitution of the American Negro:" "The evidence now available shows clearly that racial characters are largely variations of form which have no distinct functional survival value in modern civilization."

Today, the very notion of actually measuring a bunch of dead people to make such a point seems not only ghoulish and bizarre, but totally unnecessary. "Sure there's no need to do that now," Cobb agrees. No one, for instance, rushed out to measure Black athletes' thighs after Jimmy "The Greek's" comments as Cobb had so measured Jesse Owens' heel bone after similar comments were made 50 years ago. But the kind of harmful racial stereotyping reflected in such comments is still around, Cobb believes. "That substrate has been there all the time. And it must be fought."

So his narrative comes back to the issue of fighting racism. "As I began to hear this race stuff I decided the whole set-up was wrong," reflects a man whose own hue is so light he easily could "pass," as they used to say in the old days. "So I just made up my mind that I would try to do something about it. I didn't know what, but something."

Gradually, alongside his Howard teaching career, he began defining what those "somethings" would be.

Because he was a teacher of future Black physicians and had no interest in sending them out into a circumscribed world, segregated hospitals and medical societies became a natural target for his concern and activism. And his activism in behalf of Black physicians led him naturally to the kind of activism in behalf of his race as a whole that found its expression in his work for the NAACP.

Because he was at Howard, historically the premier training ground for the nation's Black physicians, it became likewise natural for him to develop an interest in the history of Blacks in medicine and want to to pursue that interest in a concrete way.

Because he was "Will Cobb, the printer's boy," and a long term lover of all things literary, there was perhaps both ink in his blood and a bit of the muse in his soul. So it was natural that he embrace the roles of editor and writer.

"One thing just sort of led to another," says Cobb. And what links them all, he believes, is "a constructive outlook." To illustrate what he means, he proffers a verse he learned as a child: "If you're not getting better, you're bound to be worse, for nothing stands still in the universe." Looking very proud of himself, he adds, "So I decided many years ago that when I went out in the world, I would be trying to move forward."

Many are those who are grateful for that decision.

"Dr. Cobb has really dedicated his whole life to service," says orthopedic surgeon Charles H. Epps, a Cobb protégé and friend, who for eight years was an assistant editor of the *JNMA*. "I'm sure he has a treasury of people who feel, as I do, indebted by all he's done."

> "I told Adams, 'Yes, I would be interested in an academic career . . . if I could pick my field.' He said, 'What field do you want?' I said, 'Anatomy.'"
>
> — *W. Montague Cobb*

Consider that indebtedness as it relates to just one issue: opening the doors of the nation's hospitals to Black residents, interns and physicians. "Dr. Cobb didn't even practice clinical medicine, but was concerned about having Black physicians get hospital privileges in predominantly white hospitals," says LaSalle Leffall, who was once also an assistant editor of the *JNMA*. "To me that's the mark of a big man. He had nothing personal to gain from it [gaining hospital privileges]. It was just a part of his concern with striving for social justice.

"Young Black physicians coming up today take these privileges for granted. I talk to students about where they're going to do a residency and one says, 'Oh, I'm going to Johns Hopkins' or 'I'm going to Georgetown' or 'I'm going to The Washington Hospital Center,' wherever. They don't even think about it. They don't know what it was like then. But people like me and others who followed know the great efforts Dr. Cobb has made in our behalf and we are grateful."

Consider, also, his service to just two of the organizations that bear his imprint: the National Medical Association and the NAACP.

Observes John Joyner, the current president of the NMA, the 93-year-old organization that represents the nation's 16,000 Black physicians: "Dr. Cobb is certainly one of the most distinguished past presidents of the NMA and we are certainly appreciative of all the contributions he has made to the NMA and that he continues to make to it." When asked if he ever studied under Cobb, the Indianapolis neurosurgeon replies, "Not formally. But to know Dr. Cobb is to study and to learn."

Observes the Rev. Edward Hailes, president of the Washington branch of the NAACP and vice chairman of its national board of directors who served on the board for many years with Cobb: "In addition to the tangible contributions Dr. Cobb has made to the NAACP—such as the giving of his talents — he has been a constant motivator of people, always getting the members of the board to keep their minds focused on the issues. People get emotional when it comes to civil rights, but Dr. Cobb was able to rise above emotionalism. When he became president of the NAACP [1976-82] he made what had been a ceremonial office into an operative office and he spoke courageously from that office to the issues of the day."

So the plaudits roll in, as do multiple honors. Cobb has had a medical education building named for him (at the Charles R. Drew Postgraduate Medical School in Los Angeles), a medical society (the NMA's Columbia, Md., affiliate), a medical library (within the NMA office in Washington), a high school science club (at Armstrong High School in Richmond, Va.) and has been the recipient of a slew of other honors — honorary degrees, citations, certificates, medals, scrolls, plaques, keys to the city. When asked how he feels about all this, he replies, "I think I've been blessed because I'm alive to see it."

Cobb the Teacher

Notwithstanding all the honors and plaudits, there has been one role Cobb has played in his long, full life that seems to have earned him mixed reviews. That is his role as teacher.

From his days as a four-year-old in Miss Montgomery's and Miss Williams' class-

room, Cobb had been convinced that the role of the teacher was "to make the educational process a pleasure." In keeping with this spirit, he often referred to the course he taught freshmen medical students at Howard as "our one-year frolic in anatomy, the kindergarten of medicine" and did more than his share of frolicking himself.

One day he might come into class jumping rope, another imitating the movements of an embryo in the womb, all in the interest of explaining some point about anatomy, of course. Sometimes he would bring his trusty violin into the anatomy laboratory, and take it out and play some soothing music, all in the interest of getting students to relax about this whole messy, unnerving business of dissecting a cadaver, of course. "This is to help you relax, doctor, just relax," his voice would caress as the strains of the slow movement from a Handel sonata would fill the air.

Some of his students were delighted by such antics. Others thought he was a nut.

Then there was the matter of the way he interjected into lectures quotations from the Bible or Shakespeare or the classics or whatever; his own reflections on history or philosophy or sociology or current events, or whatever; and his miscellaneous comments on subjects ranging from the structure of Jesse Owens' heel bone (again) to sexual practices through the ages.

About all this, too, the student verdict was mixed. While most found Cobb's lectures interesting, many couldn't see what some of the information presented in them had to do with what they needed to know as physicians.

"Oh, some students would get very annoyed with Dr. Cobb, sure," recalls Epps. "And the thing about Dr. Cobb, which I think is true for most professors who are very bright and have a wide range of interests, is that you often don't appreciate them as a student, you only appreciate them afterwards."

Many of Cobb's students did later come to see that the parts of his lectures they once had judged irrelevant or tangential had behind them a sound educational purpose. "One of the things Dr. Cobb tried to make students realize," says Epps, "is that knowledge is ever so expansive and that we need to know a lot about not only anatomy, but everything. In general, doctors tend to be one-sided; we know a lot about the sciences, but don't get enough exposure to other branches of knowledge. Well, Dr. Cobb was a man who mastered the sciences and excelled in the humanities and he delighted in trying to spur us to do the same, not always with much success, I might add."

Similarly, Leffall applauds Cobb's ambition to turn out "the broad physician," an idea that has come back into currency with recent reform movements in medical education: "Dr. Cobb used to tell us the more well-rounded you are, the more tolerant, the more compassionate, the more human."

Still, through the years some rumblings of discontent with the content and style of Cobb's teaching persisted. This was true, though to a lesser degree, with the graphic method of learning anatomy he pioneered and promoted. Through this method, students were required to demonstrate their knowledge of the structure of the human body by making detailed, carefully labeled drawings, using as models a dissected cadaver, a skeleton and a live person. A typical exam question might be, "Draw on a blank sheet of paper an outline of the ventral aspect of the male figure with the skeleton in correct proportions," as he described it in a 1946 *JNMA* article.

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>
> *– LaSalle D. Leffall Jr.*

Critics of this method contended that it tended to favor and reward those with good drawing skills but that such skills may or may not have anything to do with the kind of understanding of the body's structure needed by physicians. Cobb dismissed this objection, citing "the tremendous mental disciplinary value of the graphic method in compelling thorough analytical and accurate observation, a habit invaluable to a physician."

Today, the graphic method as Cobb promoted it has been pretty much abandoned, though not entirely. Explains Raymond L. Hayes Jr., the current chairman of Howard's anatomy department, "We don't require students to develop line drawing reproductions of the anatomy [of the body]. In many respects, though, the students do it on their own. It becomes obvious to any student taking anatomy that you have to boil things down to a basic skeleton in order to carry the information around with you. But we don't ask students to do any kind of drawing [on an exam] because we don't want their artistic abilities to be the criterion for evaluation.

"What we try to emphasize in our teaching is the *application* of the material the students have learned. In other words, it is not enough to be able to create a line drawing showing the structure of a particular part of the body. You have to be able to use that information in some kind of practical context, be able to figure out what happens when that particular part isn't working right, for instance. For the last five to seven years most anatomy courses around the country have become problem oriented."

Ever combative, Cobb predicts that the graphic method will make a comeback. "Here's what we're getting now," he says. "The computer industry has gotten into it [medicine] and computers are doing this scanning now. But the physicians who interpret the scans don't have the background of actually visualizing what is there. And so, I am perfectly content to wait, because one of my themes is 'Man is a slow learner.'"

'69 Protest

As the '60s were coming to a close and strident demands for Student Power and Black Power were convulsing campuses throughout the nation, a vocal group of Howard medical students thought more than Cobb's graphic method might be out of date. These students thought *he* was. "Medical Students Boycott Class to Protest Anachronistic Professor" ran the headline above a front page *Hilltop* article on February 7, 1969. The outcome of the boycott was the ouster of Cobb as anatomy department chairman, a post he had held since 1947.

The leader of the boycott was the president of the College of Medicine's freshman class, Ewart Brown, who as president of the Howard University Student Association had helped lead a successful takeover of Howard's administration building the previous spring. Today, Brown is a successful Los Angeles physician and a

. . . Howard's anatomy laboratory in the '40s

. . . playing the violin

. . . acting out "Casey at the Bat"

. . . portraying W.E.B. Du Bois in "Without a Doubt" at the Kennedy Center

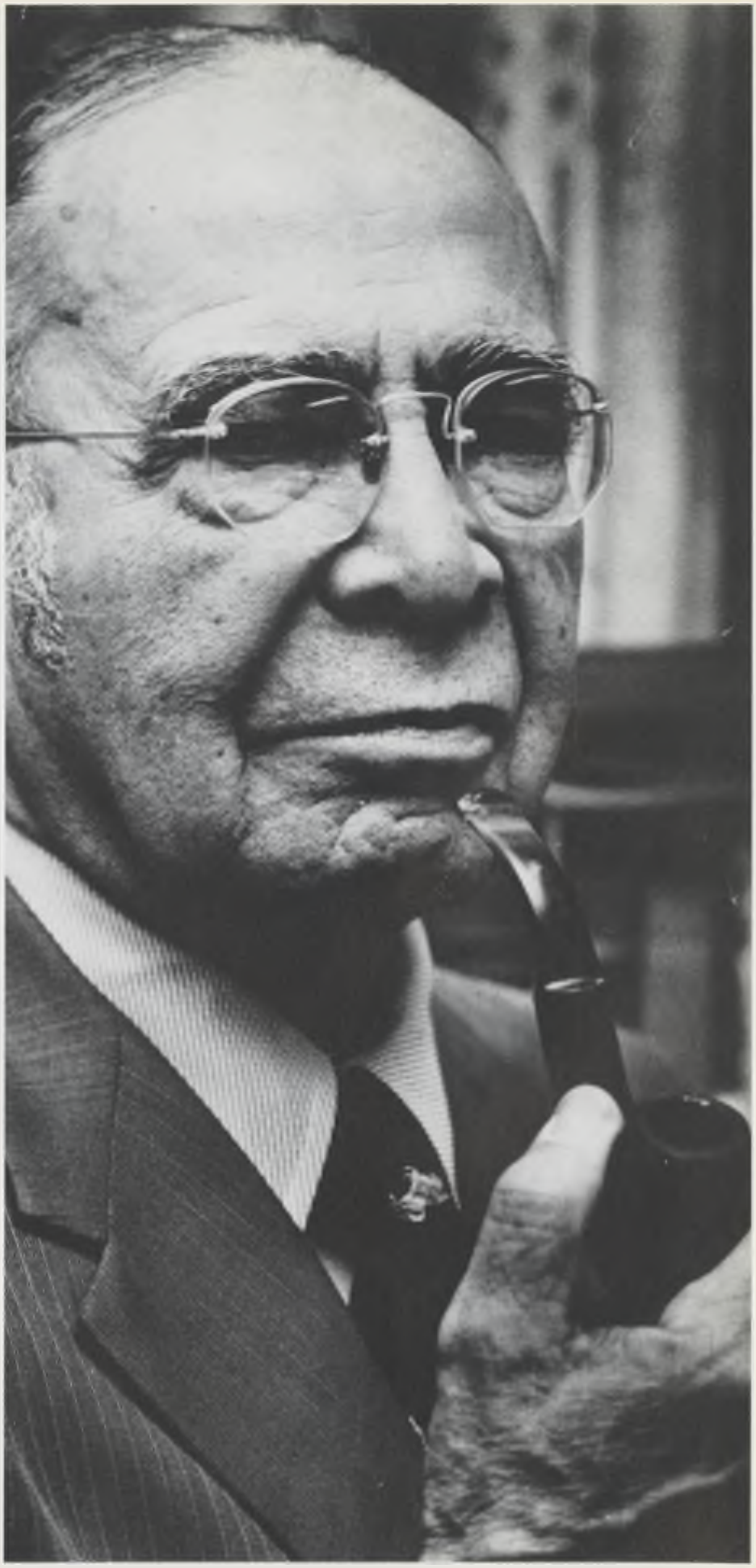
strong booster of Howard, currently a candidate for West Coast representative of the national alumni association. When asked about the Cobb protest, he urges that it be placed within the context of the times. In his view:

"What you had was an entering class that was fresh from the most tumultuous year in college life in America and which contained a core of students steeped in principles of radical activity. So the atmosphere was ripe for students to reject anything that smacked of paternalism and inadequacy. At the time the Howard medical school had a reputation of producing people who did not do well on the National Board exams. We determined early in the game that one of the reasons for that, particularly in anatomy, was that students weren't given the material that would ultimately appear on the Boards. When Dr. Cobb refused to come to a meeting we called to discuss our concerns, we successfully were able to convert that refusal into the initiation of a boycott."

Brown contends the boycott was never meant as a personal attack on Cobb. "Dr. Cobb is an amazing individual," he says. "Dr. Cobb is a brilliant man. I don't want to give any impression other than that I have a deep and lasting respect for his abilities. He had a unique and powerful way of presenting basic concepts in anatomy, talking about the heart and likening it to a pump, that sort of thing. But at the point where we met up with him he was more interested in entertaining than in the hard academics. So you'll find that most of my classmates will remember Dr. Cobb in terms of the theatrics — playing the violin while we dissected cadavers, offering $10 to anybody who could remember the source of a quote. . . .

"It was the way he ran the department, though, that most concerned us. He was the responsible leader of the anatomy department, charged with providing students with an adequate curriculum. And we found out he hadn't had a faculty meeting in years . . . We thought that Howard deserved better, that we deserved better and we took the necessary steps."

Others viewed the protest and its outcome in far less lofty terms. For Epps, for instance, what happened to Cobb in 1969 was "a travesty." "I was a young faculty person then," he recalls, "and I was distressed by what I perceived to be a program of persecution. The students who put the medical school under siege had been the same ones who had caused a lot of disruption on the campus when they were under-



graduates; so when they came to the medical school they were determined to do the same thing. And they decided, 'Let's knock off the biggest one here. Well, that's got to be Montague Cobb. So, let's get rid of Cobb.' They didn't like his style and they went after him.

"They would be out there in front of the television cameras every day calling for his dismissal, his resignation, saying anything they wanted with complete indemnity. But Dr. Cobb, as a man of restraint and propriety and decorum, wasn't interested in doing the same thing. It was not his style to fight the battle in the media."

In April 1969, Epps and 57 other faculty members of the College of Medicine submitted a petition to Howard University President James N. Nabrit Jr., and Howard's Board of Trustees protesting the "abrupt removal" of Cobb from the anatomy chairmanship, concluding: "We deplore the use of intimidation, boycott or strike as instruments of change in the College of Medicine and further deplore what may be considered recent submission to these instruments by the Administration."

Cobb's case was taken up by the medical school's grievance committee, which recommended he be reinstated as chairman. He never was. The executive committee of the Board of Trustees took up the matter the following September and in what Cobb views as vindication and some others saw as a face-saving gesture, the committee moved to appoint Cobb distinguished professor of anatomy, the first distinguished professor in the university's history. The announcement of the appointment was made by Howard's then new president, James E. Cheek.

The Testimonial

On November 10, 1973, 500 people attended a testimonial dinner for Cobb organized by Epps and Leffall, two of the three men Cobb considers "sons" [the other is his internist son-in-law Robert S. Wilkinson Jr.]. The two prominent surgeons conceived of the affair as a formal way to express support and appreciation for one they believed had been so beleaguered but who had given so much to so many. Among those in attendance were some of the participants in the '69 boycott.

"When many in that class became seniors they realized how unfair they had been to Dr. Cobb," says Epps. "By then they had a chance to become familiar with and reflect on what the man had accomplished under very difficult circumstances and at great financial sacrifice. He worked at a time when medical school salaries were just deplorable. So it was gratifying to see that some in that class realized it had mistreated him and made efforts to make amends."

Ask Cobb what that "mess in '69" was all about and how he feels about it and you get a variety of responses. A bit of conspiracy theory: "During that time, you know, there were squads of hell raisers who would move from campus to campus." A Biblical reference: "A fellow came to me and said, 'Dr. Cobb, why are you taking this so calmly?' I said, 'Because it's not in our hands. The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away.'" Another Biblical reference, this one referring to the protesting students: "None so blind as those who will not see." And finally a boxing analogy: "I beat them. I was taught that when you've got a man helpless [as he claims he had the students] you shake a glove in his face and if he can't respond, well, then the referee steps in. I just shook a glove in the face of those people and they hurt permanently." Perhaps.

> "One of the things Dr. Cobb tried to make students realize is that knowledge is ever so expansive and that we need to know a lot about not only anatomy, but everything."
>
> —*Charles H. Epps*

Cobb spent the balance of his years on the Howard faculty in relative tranquility and found himself more than welcome on a number of other campuses as a visiting professor, as well. Says Epps, "No matter what people ever felt about him at Howard, he was always highly respected away from it. He had a little saying to that effect, something about a man being a king everywhere but in his own country, something like that. When I have traveled I have never met a person in the anatomy department of any university who did not know W. Montague Cobb."

Cobb is no fan of mandatory retirement, but when he became 70 he settled not uncomfortably into his emeritus faculty status. During his post-retirement years, three ambitious projects have vied for his attention: a textbook designed to compress the rudiments of anatomy into 100 pages; a comprehensive history of the Black American in medicine; an autobiography. Of the latter, he notes dryly, "I don't think it will be dull."

During these years, other new challenges have beckoned. He was 77 when he made his debut as a serious actor (after years as an accomplished "ham") at the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts no less. He did so in a June 17, 1982 performance of "Without A Doubt," a collage of poetry, speeches and songs exemplifying the history of Afro-Americans which had been compiled and directed by his daughter, Amelia Cobb Gray, a University of the District of Columbia theater professor. Cobb portrayed the scholar-activist W.E.B. Du Bois, a man he had known and admired.

The role Cobb more typically has been asked to play in recent years is that of wise elder statesman. As one who has helped push open the doors of opportunity for Black Americans, he frequently is asked to evaluate how Blacks are faring today. "The doors are technically open," he is wont to answer, "but you've still got to fight your way in. The analogy I use is that the generation to which I belong is like the offensive linemen on a football team. Their job is to hit and make holes. But you've got to have fast backs there ready to rush right through or those holes will close up.

"Our situation today is that we've got the holes, but we're short on the fast backs to run through. One of the problems is that our people aren't oriented to studying. We've got to get our youngsters oriented to education so they will have the rigor to compete and forge ahead."

Ask him to predict how it will all come out and he demurs. "I don't go in for prophecy," he answers. "Prophecy has been given to those with Divine Light. I don't have that. I can just say as [journalist] Heywood Broun would write, 'It seems to me.'"

Ask him to share his formula for a satisfying old age, he keeps it simple as befitting "lowly Mr. Will Cobb, the printer's boy," as he often describes himself. "Keep moving forward," he says. "Just keep moving forward."

Then the fragile-looking old fighter adds a postscript: "I'd rather be moving forward ever more slowly than to be sliding back. And so when I go down, I hope I'll go down still pushing for something in the forward direction." □